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Summary:

“I came here to sleep,” Eddie says quietly. “I was hoping that I could stay here for a little while. Just until I find an apartment.”

“Course,” says Richie. “A sleepover. Just like old times.”

A hormone-addled minefield. Just like old times.

1. Chapter 1

Richie hasn't been sleeping, lately.

If he had to guess, he thinks it *might* have something to do with remembering he was in love with his best friend. Could possibly be related to the fact that he watched said friend almost die at the hands of an evil clown. Or, hey, maybe it was the fact that, after all of that, he went back to his wife.

Could be a lot of things.

What he *is* absolutely certain of, is that the swing music emanating from next door is not fucking helping.

He gets up, about to go over there and ask them to please, please, turn it down. But when he opens the door, Eddie is standing there, rain-soaked and surprised.

He waits a few seconds for Richie to invite him in, then sighs and pushes past him instead.

"Um," Richie says, when Eddie sits on the couch. "It's 12 am."

"I broke up with Myra."

Richie knows he's probably not supposed to be smiling, knows he's supposed to be feeling something *nuanced*, but all he can manage is pure, unadulterated joy.

"Fuck yeah."

"Richie."

"I mean, condolences, but...she was a nightmare. I would say I'd rather marry your mother, but I'm still not convinced they're different people."

“Beep beep, Richie,” Eddie says, running a hand through his wet hair.

“Sorry,” says Richie. “I know it’s a lot but...you made the right call. I’m sure of it.”

Eddie gives him a little smile at that, at least.

“So,” Richie says, “Did you come here to get drunk-cry while watching *Hoarders*, or drunk-cry while finding a rebound? Because I’m open to either.”

“I came here to sleep,” Eddie says quietly. “I was hoping that I could stay here for a little while. Just until I find an apartment.”

“Course,” says Richie. “A sleepover. Just like old times.”

A hormone-addled minefield. Just like old times.

Eddie hasn’t collected his things from Myra yet, so Richie gives him a sleep shirt and some tracksuit pants to put on after he showers.

When Eddie steps into the living room, hair dripping wet, he’s only wearing half the outfit.

“Hey,” he says, holding up the shirt emblazoned with *Your Daughter Calls Me Daddy Too* in frosted lettering. “I’m not fucking wearing this.”

Richie is gleeful. Maybe he’s not wearing it, but he is holding it up against his chest, and that’s a pretty close facsimile.

“Aw, but it suits you. You’re a divorcee in your 40s, you’re inevitably going to become a sugar daddy. Might as well embrace it.”

“Do you wear this outside? Like, in public? Without people calling the cops on you?”

“All the time, Spaghetti. Can’t pull it off as well as you though. I mean, who works out past age 40 unless they’re trying to get into a 20 year-old’s pants?”

“People who want to live past 60,” Eddie says dryly. “Where are the shirts you wear when you have to pretend to be an adult?”

Richie dutifully shows Eddie to his drawers and goes to sit on the edge of his bed.

As Eddie rifles through his clothing, water drips from his hair, forming rivulets on his back.

Richie wonders how many of them he could stop with his tongue before they soaked into the towel at his waist.

No he doesn't, because he's trying to be a friend, and a fucking adult.

He's pretty sure the answer is 7.

“Fine,” Eddie says, pulling out a tee with *Don't Talk to Me or My Son Until I've Had My Coffee* written across it. “This is...fine.”

“Ah,” says Richie. “The Chanel number.”

Eddie rolls his eyes, but slips it over his head. The stretch pulls at his scar, and he winces.

Something else crosses his features, and it looks like he might need a distraction. And if Richie is good at anything, it's being distracting.

“You know what this reminds me of? You know how sometimes girls wear their boyfriends' T-shirts, and they look *adorable* and *teeny-tiny* because the shirts are just made for a much *buffer* physique-”

“I'm going to bed.”

“Really?” asks Richie. “Your 38-step skincare regime is done? Eddie's ready for beddy?”

“Fuck off. Yes, I’m ready.”

“Perfect. Don’t worry, sheets were cleaned last year.”

Eddie makes a face and quickly says “I can sleep on the couch.”

“I’m kidding. They’re clean.”

Eddie rolls his eyes. “I know. You really don’t have enough of a poker face to mess with me.”

Like hell he doesn’t have a poker face. He’s kept a poker face for the last 40 years.

“I’m just saying, it’s your house.”

He’d normally cave and take the bed pretty fucking quickly, but he still has Eddie’s wince replaying in his mind.

“‘Comedy legend makes wounded hero sleep on couch’. That’d be great publicity.”

He can see Eddie mouth the words “comedy legend?” (or, maybe, “wounded hero?”), but barrels on regardless.

“I sleep in, so get breakfast whenever you want. There’s goldfish crackers in the cupboard. Pour some milk on them, and you’ve got yourself a cereal.”

“Anything that could legally be called food?”

“I bought a satsuma 2 weeks back. It’s yours, if you can find it.”

“Perfect,” says Eddie cheerily. “I’m going to die here.”

Richie motions vaguely towards the pile of dirty socks in the corner of his room.

“But what a place to go.”

2. Chapter 2

Richie wakes up with a crick in his neck and a pain in his back, but he still feels far more rested than he has in weeks.

It's nice, just knowing Eddie's here.

He gets up, hearing about 80 bones crack in the process, and peers in the open door to the bedroom.

Eddie's not here.

Don't panic, he reminds himself, already seeing claws and blood and too-pale skin.

He bites down on his lip until the pain grounds him. Checks his phone for messages, then spots the note on the kitchen counter.

Buying real food

Be back in 15

He sits back down on the couch, lays his head in his hands and just breathes for a minute.

"Hey," comes a cheery voice from the door. "Did you know your supermarket has enriched milk? And acai berries? And-a-are you okay?"

Richie looks up and plasters a smile on his face.

"We have acai berries. I'm fucking ecstatic."

"I can't cook."

"It's not *cooking*," Eddie says, sounding increasingly frustrated. "It's

mixing things in a bowl.”

“That sounds like cooking.”

“Then you add the chocolate chips,” Eddie barrels on, and Richie perks up.

“There are chocolate chips?”

“Not if you want it to be as healthy as possible. But I figured you wouldn’t eat it without.”

Richie snorts. It reminds him of mothers hiding carrot in their familys’ spaghetti bolognaise.

Eddie frowns, so Richie decides to be extra helpful and stir the chips through the oat mixture.

“Then you put it in the fridge.”

“Easy-peasy,” says Richie, like he hadn’t been complaining about the process for the last five minutes.

Eddie just gives him a look.

“This isn’t bad,” Richie says the next morning. “For health food.”

“Maybe we won’t die of malnutrition after all,” says Eddie, before getting up and sliding his chair in.

“I’m heading off,” he says. “Going to explore the town. See if there’s anywhere that sells tempeh.”

The fridge is full. And Eddie is not quite looking at him.

“...I’ll go with you.”

“That’s ok,” says Eddie. “I’ve already invaded your flat. I’m sure you’d like some time to yourself.” And he’s out the door before Richie can protest.

It would make sense if Eddie just wanted some alone time. It would sting a little, because Richie feels like they've had enough alone time for a fucking lifetime. But it would make sense.

But the more he thinks about it, the more certain he is that Eddie's lying.

He's wearing a button-up and slacks, his clothes recovered from Myra a few days ago. He's done his hair properly, none of the stray strands over his eyes that Richie likes.

Dressed for a date.

It keeps happening, same time each week. This girl (*guy?*) must be a huge fucking fan of brunch. And really obsessive about scheduling.

Eddie would probably like that. Eddie probably wants them to live in their couple bubble for a little while without Richie popping it.

Richie can resist the urge to noogie the answers out of him. He has matured a little since high school. Or he's trying to, at least.

There are moments each day, a minute or an hour, where Richie forgets that Eddie's seeing someone. Contentment lives in those moments. He doesn't think "settled" can describe the life of anyone who's been stalked by a clown monster, but it's pretty damn close.

Eddie's scar is healing, day by day. Richie resists the urge to ask to run his fingers over it, to prove to himself that it's disappearing, and he thinks he deserves some kind of medal for that.

Eddie does most of the cooking and cleaning. Richie tries to help out, but that usually just means it gets done twice (by Richie; and properly).

Eddie gets an office job downtown. He complains a lot about *douchebag Tony in accounts*, but, apart from that, he seems to like it ok. Richie doesn't think Eddie needs work to be a distraction, not in the same way he does.

Richie works on his stand-up. He's started dropping in his own lines. An offhand reference. A quip at the end of a set. And the better the reactions get, the more he works in. It's easier, now that life seems funnier. Now that each day is filled with Eddie, ranting for an hour about why on earth the buffet down the street wouldn't have sneeze guards. Eddie, biting down on smiles. Eddie, snapping back at him with *perfect* comebacks. Eddie, failing to come up with a comeback *at all*, flipping him the bird with a self-conscious glare. To Richie, it's all so, so funny.

His bad dreams get less frequent, and he catches himself from crying out.

Usually.

When he doesn't, Eddie kneels by the couch, wakes him, slides their hands together.

Richie can feel the waves and troughs of his fingerprints. He thinks he's in love with them, thinks about how fucking ridiculous that is and almost laughs, sweat-slicked and doused in fear though he is.

Eddie's eyebrow quirks, concerned.

"M'fine," Richie manages.

The voice that meets him is a little quiet, and a little worried, but it says, "I know *you're* fine. I've been crouching for ten fucking minutes. If I have to get my knees reconstructed, I'm billing you."

Richie does laugh, then, and moves his legs up so Eddie can sit next to him.

He thinks Eddie probably means to leave after a few minutes.

He doesn't think either of them mean to fall asleep.

But when he wakes, Eddie is laying on top of him, head in the crook of his shoulder, hand resting against his stomach.

Richie tries to think through his options, because when he's thinking through his options, he's not focussed on the warm, slow breaths tickling his neck, or the fact that Eddie twitches in his sleep, fingers skittering just a little every few minutes.

So...

Option 1: Wait it out, scrolling through his phone. "I was totally comfortable and casual with you sleeping on top of me until you woke up because I feel nothing but platonic feelings for you. And if you're weirded out by that, maybe *you're* the one who has weird feelings. Check and mate."

Option 2: Wake Eddie up. "This is awkward, I'm going to awkwardly wake you up before telling you I need a piss and awkwardly leaving. It's going to be very obvious that we're both awkward". Perhaps the noblest option? Unless Eddie is having a particularly good dream. He hopes Eddie's having a good dream.

Option 3: Attempt a covert extrication mission with an even lower chance of success than that *127 Hours* guy had, and possibly an even higher chance of limb amputation. Probably wake Eddie up in the process.

Option 4: Pretend to sleep for...however many hours Eddie is going to sleep for, plus 15 minutes, to counter suspicion. Hope and pray his bladder doesn't explode. Leave Eddie to his much simpler extrication mission. Let him pretend they didn't wake up glued to each other.

Eddie lets out this little sigh, and drags his foot up Richie's calf, and it soon becomes clear that if Eddie wakes up now, there is going to be a *situation* that Richie is going to be utterly at a loss to explain away.

The 127 Hours guy only lost one arm, right? He can lose one arm. The right one seems the most vital right now.

Richie tries little shuffles, at first, and utterly fails to move an inch.

He thinks about a party trick he saw once, someone whipping a tablecloth out from under crockery, the whole tableau staying intact.

He hopes it works with people.

“Ow. What the fuck, Trashmouth?”

“Ow,” Richie agrees, laying on the floor. At least there’s not a situation anymore.

Eddie is giving him an incredulous, and accusatory look.

“I was trying not to wake you up,” Richie attempts.

The look grows more incredulous.

Richie plasters on his most placating smile.

“Breakfast?”

“Pancakes,” says Eddie, which is answering a wholly different question, one that Richie is fairly certain he didn’t ask.

But Eddie is curling up on the couch, rubbing his shoulder, and Richie feels like maybe he deserves pancakes.

He hands Eddie his plate. “These three aren’t burnt.”

Eddie smiles at him. He’s looking a little shyer, a little more self-conscious than he was this morning.

Which is why it’s so surprising when he says “I was thinking. We could both fit in my bed.”

Richie blinks 5 times in succession, and, because he has no idea what else to say, says “When did it become your bed?”

“When I slept in it for a month. Squatter’s rights. Look, you wouldn’t get that crick in your neck-“

Richie self-consciously stops rubbing at his neck.

“-and I won’t have to trek to the living room when you have a nightmare-”

“You *don’t* have to. And they’re not nightmares.” Children have nightmares. “They’re just dreams.”

“Shut up,” says Eddie. “I didn’t mean it that way. I’ll just be there sooner. And there’s more room than on the couch, so you won’t have to fucking deadlift me when you wake up in the morning.”

“Ok,” Richie says, “I did not *deadlift* you, although I’m flattered that you think I could do that-”

“Listen,” Eddie says, “if you don’t want to-”

I really don’t, is what Richie means to say, because it’s a terrible idea, for many reasons, but “I do,” is what comes out, *thank you very much, traitorous brain*.

“I mean, sure. Let’s try it.”

As he digs into his pancakes, Eddie has this triumphant little smile on his face, like he’s won an argument.

Richie wants to pinch his cheeks, call him *cute, cute, cute*, but it hasn’t exactly been the kind of day where he can play that off as a joke.

Then again, since his life is a fucking farce, and they’re going to be *sleeping together* now, there’s probably never going to be another day where he can play that off as a joke.

Shit.

3. Chapter 3

They're lying in Richie's bed, staring at the ceiling. In silence. Carefully positioned so that there's no danger of touching.

It's very awkward.

Richie sees Eddie start shaking from his peripheral vision. *Oh God. Eddie's probably started stress-crying from how awkward it is.*

Richie turns onto his side, and sees that Eddie is actually laughing. A lot.

"Sorry," Eddie splutters, holding a hand up to his mouth. "Shit. Sorry. It's just very..."

"Yeah," says Richie, and starts to laugh a little too.

"And you're wearing *that* fucking shirt? Of all things."

Richie looks down at his shirt that reads *Sugar Tits*.

"This is my favourite shirt. It was a gift from a stripper."

"Touching," says Eddie, smiling and shaking his head, looking fucking adorable.

"She said I had great potential."

"For stripping?"

"Uh-huh. Seductive hips."

"Uh-uh. No human has ever said that to another human. Let alone *a stripper* saying it to *you*. That would be like a NASA engineer complimenting the maths skills of a toddler."

"You would say that. You haven't seen the hips yet."

Yet?? BEEP BEEP RICHIE.

Eddie opens his mouth, closes it, and opens it again. "Whatever.

Sexiest hips in the world couldn't make up for the fact that you always have Doritos dust on you somewhere."

THANK YOU EDDIE I OWE YOU MY LIFE AND MY DIGNITY.

"I could make that work. Doritos dust is definitely someone's kink."

Eddie mumbles about just how disgusting that is until he drifts off to sleep.

It doesn't matter that Richie doesn't have his glasses on, and Eddie's just a collection of pale rectangles.

Richie can still feel the calm roll off him. Can still fall into a deep, dreamless sleep.

Richie and Eddie wake up within a few seconds of each other.

Which is how Eddie realises his hand is laying on Richie's hip a moment after Richie does.

They stare at each other for a second.

"Told you so."

"Fuck off," Eddie says, going pink and pulling his hand back. "First dibs on the shower."

"Listen," Richie says, when they're both sitting down to breakfast. "I don't want to alarm you-"

Eddie, accordingly, looks alarmed.

"But I might come down with pneumonia. Someone used up all the hot water when they showered for a fucking epoch, so-"

Eddie is hit by relief and frustration, in equal measure. Richie is hit

by a placemat.

“Go write in to Dear Fucking Abby about it.”

Not a bad idea, Richie thinks.

Dear (Fucking) Abby,

My friend takes really long showers. I would know what that means, usually, except this friend is completely neurotic, and might just be spending an hour a day washing behind his ears, and for some reason that's even hotter to me than the other thing he could be doing, so I guess my question is:

What the fuck is wrong with me?

Your longtime fan,

Richie Tozier

Dear (Fucking) Abby,

I've noticed something strange. Whenever I remember to take the trash out, a certain Edward Kaspbrak will let me call him 'Eds' for the whole day.

Is he conditioning me?

Why is it working?

Please respond,

Richie Tozier

Dear (Fucking) Abby,

I think his eyes have actually gotten bigger since we were at school.

Is this possible? Do you know any anatomists you can call about this? Or maybe an RSPCA volunteer specialising in rage-fuelled bush babies?

Stop ignoring me,

Seriously,

I'm so fucked,

Please send help,

Or just drop a grand piano on my crotch honestly it would solve so many problems,

Yours,

Faithfully yet despairingly,

Richie Tozier

4. Chapter 4

Notes for the Chapter:

Didn't put it in the tags so I will mention here -- there will be some references to Eddie's injury and past gore in this and later chapters.

It's been a month. And Eddie's still going on brunch dates. Same time, every time. Still using the same excuse.

It feels like they're scheduled to coincide with Richie getting his hopes up. A gust to upend the stack of thoughts he's been trying to put in order.

Eddie sleeps on top of him. Eddie goes on a date. Eddie watches him. Eddie goes on a date.

Richie knows it won't help, to know who she is, how serious they are. But he has to know, just the same.

He *means* to ask like an adult, but he's been sitting at the dining table, struggling with a set for an hour, and Eddie comes home with his hair all ruffled, like someone's been running their hands through it, and what comes out is, "It's funny. You always go walking at the same time. And it always takes exactly an hour and a half."

Eddie's mouth twists, and he goes to start filling the kitchen sink. Richie's pretty sure that washing dishes is a nervous tic for him. It probably says something about how much Richie eats that there are always dishes for him to wash.

"If you're seeing someone, you could just *tell* me," Richie says. *Please God don't tell me that.*

Eddie flips the tap off with enough force that Richie is a little surprised it doesn't break.

"*Fine*," he says, turning to face Richie. "I'm seeing someone. It helps,

to talk about...everything.”

“You could talk to me.”

Christ, he sounds like a child.

A new expression paints itself across Eddie’s face. Pity, or surprise, or, maybe something warmer. “I know,” he says. “But sometimes it helps to talk to a professional.”

Richie’s brain flickers on and off. *Professional means...therapist, right? Or escort. Probably not escort. Maybe his girlfriend just happens to be way more professional than Richie. Most people are. Maybe Eddie’s getting pegged by a hot executive while Richie eats Froot Loops from the box and watches daytime television.*

He considers how much of this he can say out loud, and decides on, “...A professional?”

Eddie rolls his eyes. “I know comedians like to think they have the key to the human psyche, but you didn’t actually *study* it for five years, so, you know, I’m probably going to stick with the person who has a degree.”

Oh. He should probably say something supportive here. That he’s glad Eddie’s getting help, and-fuck it, he really needs to know.

“Right. So you’re not...*dating* anyone?”

There’s a *clang* as the plate Eddie’s holding hits the bottom of the sink. “*That’s* what you were-?” He turns away from Richie, looking into the water as if the plate is seven fathoms deep. “Uh, no. No, I’m not dating anyone.”

“Right,” says Richie. “That’s good. I mean not-not the fact that you’re not dating.” *Jesus Christ.* “The, um, therapy thing. If it’s helping.”

“It does,” Eddie says stiltedly. “Sometimes. We don’t really talk about It, because-well, I’d be in an institution. It’s mostly, um, smaller things. Well.” He pauses. “Not smaller. Just different.” He glances at Richie, quickly, before going back to the dishes.

“Huh.”

Use your fucking words, Richie.

He doesn't find the right ones, before Eddie says, “Are you seeing someone?”

“No.” Richie thinks he means a therapist. But it's the same answer either way.

“You could try it,” Eddie says with a little shrug, like he's afraid he's going to be shot down.

Richie can't tell anyone about his visions of Eddie, stomach so slick with gore that he slips through Richie's hands. The light bleeding from his eyes, making Richie feel like he's lost his beacon, and there's nothing to do but go onwards, into the black. Every time he thinks about it, it's like being right fucking back there, and he'd do anything to get them out.

The only thing that helps is Eddie, being here, reminding him, day by day, that he's sticking around.

But he can't say that.

So, instead, he says, “Maybe a sex therapist. They could tell me why I find your mother so incredibly-”

“Beep beep, Richie,” Eddie says, smiling despite himself.

5. Chapter 5

Apparently, Eddie isn't sticking around.

On Sunday, Eddie announces that he's going apartment hunting, and asks if Richie wants to come along.

He can't ask why, or why now.

Maybe the glances lasted too long. Maybe Eddie just couldn't stand the mess.

Either way, Richie knows that once Eddie's gone, he won't be able clear away the haze of fear and loneliness that seems to infiltrate the place. Only Eddie could do that. Only Eddie keeps things Clean.

But maybe he can keep him close. Convince him to get an apartment nearby, where Richie can visit, and remind himself that he's still here. Rationed happiness.

That's his plan, at least. What actually ends up happening is that Richie finds something wrong with every single place. The 2-bedroom is a little too big, the 1-bedroom is a little too cramped, the flat in the middle of the city is basically in a red-light district, and the apartment on the city outskirts may as well be in fucking Derry.

By the time one of the landlords mentions *a lovely young family next door* and Richie mentions that *Eddie fucking hates children*, Eddie's glare is pretty much on a permanent setting.

"Richie," he says over dinner, stabbing a lettuce leaf with his fork, "you know, if you *want* me to stay, you could ask me to fucking stay."

Richie stares at him. "What the fuck, Spaghetti? You couldn't have told me that 7 hours ago?"

Eddie doesn't talk to him for two days.

But he stays.

Richie still talks to Eddie, obviously, because every one of Eddie's reactions is a dopamine hit, whether or not they're out loud. Especially now that they're actually living together, long-term, and hope and relief crowd his thoughts each day. Especially now that the silent strike gives Richie an excuse to stare at each tilt of his head, and each arc of his brow, and analyse what it means.

And it gives Richie the *frankly genius* idea of trying out his new material on this quiet, extra-irritable Eddie. Lines that can make him bite down on a smile are staying in the set.

The joke that makes Eddie break the strike with a string of cursing is *definitely* staying in the set.

But there's a lot that he can't really test on Eddie. Because there's a lot that's *about* Eddie. And he only realises, a couple days before the set, that maybe he should ask if that's ok.

"Sure," Eddie says offhandedly. "Just don't talk about how much I vacuum. I vacuum a normal fucking amount, you're just a slob. And I'd ask you to limit the mum jokes, but I know that's probably 80% of your material."

Richie picks up his phone. "Siri, delete all 800 references to The Creature from the Black Lagoon."

Bitten-down smile, Richie notes.

6. Chapter 6

Richie sits backstage, chugging his water bottle. Hears Eddie's voice in his head, telling him that he shouldn't chug *anything*, not even water, unless he wants to destroy his digestive system. Thinks about the number of times he's puked before shows, and decides he may have a point. In this one case. He takes little sips, ends up puking in a sink anyway, and makes a mental note to tell Eddie he's full of shit after the show.

It helps, to think of things he's going to do "after the show". It creates the impression that he's going to survive this. That someone won't throw a platform heel at him for crimes against comedy, killing him instantly. Who knows if it's true. But it's a comforting thought.

He can't decide if Eddie watching is a comforting thought. It really depends on whether he survives this.

Half an hour later, it's going well enough that Eddie's role has upgraded from *witness to my destruction* to *friendly face in the crowd*. As friendly as Eddie's face can be, at least. He's making a lot of Expressions, and at least 70% seem positive. Highly possible that will change once Richie gets to the Eddie-centric part of the set. It's not a confession. But he still feels like his heart is embroidered across his chest, like rainbow strobe lights will start spontaneously going off the second he mentions Eddie's name. And it would be bullshit to say the thought doesn't scare him, the same way the thought of doing his own material scares him, but there's also no fucking way he's going back to jokes about the girlfriend he doesn't have, hasn't had for decades. So. *Fuck it*.

"...By the way, if you hear heckling, just assume it's from my roommate. He really didn't want me to point him out, so I'll just say he's in the third row, and he's the only person who wore a fucking suit to a c-grade comedy gig. Eddie, it kind of blows your cover when you flip me the bird."

"I asked Eddie if he wanted to come to my gig tonight, and he said, 'Absolutely'. I'm kidding, obviously, he said, '*Antiques Roadshow* is on. Are you better than *Antiques Roadshow*?' And I said "No," because I'm not an egomaniac, but he came along anyway. Which just goes to show you he's secretly a softie and you should all ask him for an autograph at the end of-ok, he's threatening to leave, moving on."

"Anyway, Eddie's the type of person who would never actually be on *Antiques Roadshow* because he refuses to touch anything old. He's even started giving all his old coins to me. You know, the ones that have that black gunk on them? That mystery element that only seems to spawn on coins and public transport?"

"He was throwing them out, but when I complained that our trash was earning more than me, he started giving them to me instead. So, I don't know if you've ever had someone hand you a dirty coin, without explanation, in the middle of the day, but no gesture feels more patronising, nor more welcome. It's like being a peasant boy sitting outside the palace of an extremely stingy nobleman. '10 cents today, my liege? I'll take it.' It's like when a café you've never been to before says your order's on the house, and you wonder just how homeless they think you are. Like, I'm not begging in the literal sense, but that's the vibe I give off, constantly."

"Anyway, I only need about 50 more 10 cent pieces to afford a sandwich after the show, so..."

Eddie hands him a sandwich, backstage after the show, while Richie's brain is bouncing along to the words *They liked it they liked it they like me*.

"Stop it," Richie says, beaming at him. "You're supposed to be keeping me grounded. You know free sandwiches are a gateway to me demanding coke and hookers at the next gig."

"It's a token of my appreciation," Eddie says. "Normally when I want to hear about myself for 20 minutes, I have to go to therapy. This was a lot more fun."

“Pretty sure I talked about *Jersey Shore* for longer than I talked about you. It’s had a much larger impact on my life.”

“Hm,” says Eddie. He sounds doubtful, and there’s a smile spreading across his face. He’s all soft edges today.

Richie wants to kiss him.

He’s starting to think, deep down, that there’s a chance that Eddie would let him.

Eddie meets his gaze for a few seconds, then glances at the door.

“Do you want to celebrate with a couple drinks?”

Opportunity obliterated.

“Or are you planning on, uh, networking?”

The way Eddie says it, Richie’s pretty sure he means *hooking up with groupies*.

“Building professional networks, or getting blind drunk. That’s a toughie.”

Drunk Eddie is a lot more giggly than regular Eddie. Richie thinks being stern all the time probably takes a lot more effort than he can exert right now.

Richie shuffles him into their apartment, a warm, heavy weight against his side. They’re not at school anymore. Richie can’t pick him up, hoist him over his shoulder. He wonders if he could manage a bridal carry. He wonders how long Eddie would let him live, afterwards.

Eddie clearly doesn’t know what’s on his mind, because he starts laughing.

“I have a joke,” he announces. “I have a joke you should’ve added.”

He holds a pretend microphone up to his face. "My friend is Rich, but-fuck, no, that's not how it goes. Richie Rich. The Rich bitch." Eddie giggles to himself. "No, it's um – I gave my friend all my dank-ass coins, and he went from Rich, to richer."

Eddie's big, solemn eyes look up at Richie for approval.

I love you. This is the worst stand-up I've ever heard. I love you so much.

Richie clears his throat. "I see where you're going with this. And I think we only need about 8 rewrites before we got ourselves the perfect bit."

Eddie groans. "Sleep instead."

Richie makes him brush his teeth first, because he knows that stern Eddie will definitely reappear tomorrow if that doesn't happen.

Eddie must forget that he got all his old clothes back weeks ago, because he changes into Richie's trakkies and *Sugar Tits* shirt, and promptly collapses on the bed.

Richie lays down next to him. After snapping a photo, obviously.

Eddie moves closer, resting his head in the crook of his shoulder. His lips might brush against Richie's neck. Or it might be a kiss.

It doesn't count, either way, because Eddie is drunk out of his mind.

And Richie will keep telling himself that until he falls asleep.

7. Chapter 7

They're both a little too hungover to do anything except lie around and watch TV the next day.

Richie could really go for a kebab, but it turns out Eddie is one of those annoying people who actually tries to be healthy during a hangover. He's cut up this whole fruit platter for the two of them.

They're in the middle of watching *House Hunters* when Eddie accidentally drops a half-eaten strawberry on his shirt. He sighs, places it delicately on the corner of the platter and stares at the stain. But he doesn't go clean it up.

Richie stares. "Um. Do you want me to give you and the strawberry some alone time?"

"My therapist wants me to try exposure therapy," Eddie says. "You know. Letting things...not be clean. For at least a minute or two. I could've told her that if running through sewers didn't do it, it's probably not going to happen, but-"

"It's different," says Richie. "You didn't really have a choice, then. You have a choice now."

"Maybe. Or maybe I'm made of unfixable parts." His gaze fixes back on the TV. Like maybe he didn't mean to say that out loud. Or maybe he just doesn't think it merits a fucking conversation.

And maybe it's the fact that Eddie has grey pooling under his eyes, or that the strawberry stain is sitting right where he was skewered. Maybe it's just the thought of Eddie's mother convincing him he's more problem than person. But suddenly Richie's a little too angry to watch what comes out of his mouth.

"You don't need to fix a fucking thing. But- but if you want to change something, you can. You can do fucking anything, Eds. Whatever you want. You can have."

Eddie's looking at him, eyes wide.

BEEP BEEP, RICHIE. CHANGE THE FUCKING SUBJECT, RICHIE.

“You know, I’m realising I basically gave you free exposure therapy for decades-“

“Richie.”

“-every time I splashed you with lake water? Or gave you a pet worm? Should’ve charged 60 bucks.”

“Richie.”

“Betcha didn’t realise that the whole time I was annoying the shit out of you, I was actually taking care of you.”

“No,” Eddie says, quieter. “I realised.”

Silence blankets the moment.

And Richie can suddenly see the appeal of carrying an inhaler everywhere. He could really fucking use one.

“I’m going to wash this off,” Eddie says abruptly, gripping his shirt. He stands up and goes to the kitchen. Richie could swear his fingers drag along his shoulder as he passes by the back of the couch.

Fuck it.

Eddie turns around, backed against the sink as Richie comes close.

“Eds-”

And suddenly balm-softened lips are pressed against his, and fingers are sliding up, up, into his hair, and Richie’s hands are digging into Eddie’s waist, and *Jesus, who has a waistline like that past age 30*, and a hundred other thoughts are flitting through his mind and running into each other.

Eddie tastes like strawberries and toothpaste. He smells of soap.

Richie wants to make him smell of sweat.

Gross, he hears Eddie say in his head.

When he pulls back a little, he sees the red stain's still there.

Strawberry, Richie reminds himself, *not blood*. He could lick it clean, easy. He wonders if he'd taste sugar, or taste Eddie.

He slides his hand up Eddie's shirt, brushing his thumb against the ridged scar across his chest.

Healed.

He barely has to shift his hand to feel the thrum of his heart.

Alive.

But the beat is off-kilter. And too fast.

Like the rhythm of his breaths.

Beep beep, Richie.

"Sorry," Richie says, moving his hand, eyes darting back to Eddie's.
"Sorry, I should've—"

"It's fine," Eddie says, looking up at him. One hand braces himself against the counter, while the other sits on Richie's jaw. His thumb fans back and forth across the stubble there, and he huffs a little laugh. "More than fine."

It's fucking incredible, is what it is.

8. Chapter 8

Richie wakes up just as his arm is falling asleep beneath him. His room is cold, and he has to nuzzle his nose into the pillow to warm it up.

Eddie's laying on his side, observing him.

"Eds" Richie says, voice croaky from sleep. "Something's wrong with your face. The corners of your mouth are turning up. But it's not a grimace?"

"Same to you, fuckface," Eddie says, still smiling. Richie's pretty sure "fuckface" has never been said so softly. It's some kind of world record, definitely.

Richie points to his sleep shirt. "I'd prefer to be known by my proper title, 'Sugar Tits'."

"Must be incredibly irritating. Not being called by your proper name."

"Oh Eds, you have no idea."

Eddie's still smiling at him. Probably also a record.

"...Seriously, do you have lockjaw, or...?"

Eddie kisses him, clasping a hand over his cheek, then pulls back thoughtfully. "Never had a way to shut you up before."

"I mean. You always had the *option*."

Eddie's smile grows. *Jesus. Is this what having a boyfriend is going to be like all the time?*

"Go brush your teeth," he says, whacking Richie on the arm. "Your mouth tastes like your mother's underwear."

Question answered. Old Eddie definitely still in there somewhere. Avert pod person protocol.

Richie obediently gets up and heads into the ensuite, almost closing the door.

“First dibs on the shower,” he says, and locks it.

“Oh, fuck you,” he hears through the door, and it’s clear that Eddie’s starting to wake up properly.

“Maybe later,” Richie calls back. “So many new products in here. I should probably use them up. Free up some space.”

“Those are *expensive*. And half of them are for cleaning. Obviously you don’t know the difference between soap and laundry detergent, because you’ve never seen either before, but please don’t use a Tide Pod as shampoo or something. And don’t eat one. I know you’re exactly the type of person who would eat a Tide Pod for a comedy routine, but it’s 2019, and that’s not funny-”

Richie leans his head against the door and grins. He hopes Eddie keeps ranting all the way through his shower.

He hopes Eddie keeps ranting forever.